

Contemporary Youth Sport: A Setup for Mental Health Disaster?

Prof Rosemary Purcell (Melbourne University, Australia)

In the general population, mental ill-health is the primary health condition affecting young people, with 50% of common mental disorders emerging before the age of 18 and 75% by the age of 25. Research shows a positive, bidirectional relationship between participating in recreational sport and mental health, with time spent in sport predicting mental wellbeing, and vice versa. However, the increased professionalism associated with *elite* sport has the potential to compromise the mental health of youth athletes, via intensified training and competition loads (which may increase risk of overtraining and/or overuse injuries), performance expectations and pressure to perform, promotion of maladaptive perfectionism, and exposure to harassment and abuse from coaching staff and/or parents. Early sport specialisation has also been linked to a range of negative outcomes in elite youth athletes, including social isolation, increased anxiety, inadequate sleep, impaired academic performance and burnout. Despite these risks, elite sport can also be protective of mental wellbeing in youth athletes who may otherwise lack purpose or meaning in their lives, or structured environments that facilitate psychosocial development and functioning. This presentation will examine the empirical research regarding the rates and correlates of mental ill-health among elite young athletes, and critically appraise the environmental factors within youth sports that can compromise or protect mental health